



Republican Policy Committee

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Crime Series #2

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The Declining Cost of Crime: The Criminal's Perspective

There are about 6,000,000 burglaries committed in the United States every year. Of these, about one-half are reported to the police (2,980,000 burglaries were reported in 1992). Of the reported burglaries, about 14 percent result in an arrest, and about 87 percent of those arrested are prosecuted. Of those prosecuted, about 79 percent are convicted, and about 25 percent of those convicted are sent to prison. Therefore, for the 6 million burglaries annually, about 72,000 burglars are sent to prison.

Burglars who are sent to prison serve about 13 months. Therefore, all burglars convicted and sentenced to prison during a year serve a cumulative total of about 78,000 years — but that prison time is the total for 6 million burglaries. *Therefore, because nearly 99 percent of all burglaries never result in a prison sentence, for each burglary committed in the United States the "expected punishment" is less than 5 days behind bars!*

"Expected punishment" is a way of measuring the cost of committing a crime. It is calculated by multiplying five *probabilities* — the probability that a crime will be reported, that someone will be arrested for the crime, that there will be a prosecution, that there will be a conviction, and that there will be a prison term actually served. Over time, the expected punishment for all serious crimes has fallen precipitously.

Since 1950, the expected punishment for burglary has fallen by about two-thirds. Because the rate of prosecution given an arrest and the rate of conviction given a prosecution are already high and probably cannot be raised much, we have but three leading options if we are to raise the expected costs of burglary to the level of 1950: We can triple the rate of arrests, or we can triple the rate of convicted burglars who are sent to prison, or we can triple the time served.

All three alternatives are expensive (though they are less expensive than having innocent persons preyed upon by burglars) — and all three require more prison space.

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NOTE: This paper is based on work on "expected punishment" by Professor Morgan Reynolds of Texas A & M University and published by the National Center for Policy Analysis, Dallas, Texas.